

**AN ANALYSIS OF ONE COMMUNITY IN THE FAR NORTH SIMPLY CORE ALASKA:
A CASE STUDY BEYOND THE STUDIO**

By Emily Kathryn Main, B.A.

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APPROVED:

Mary F. Ehrlander, Committee Chair

Terrence Cole, Committee-Co Chair

Department of Arctic & Northern Studies

Veronica M. Plumb, Committee Member

Department of Social and Human

Development

Abstract

Alaska is a vast and starkly diverse land. One could argue that communities throughout the state share as many differences as similarities. Yet, each reflects humans' need for social interaction and our reliance on one another for physical, mental and emotional well-being. This project hypothesizes that here in the far north, family and community are particularly important to mental and emotional well-being. In a region where winters are long, cold and dark, and where individuals, especially non-Native Alaskans, often live far from their birth families and communities, we tend to form virtual families or communities to fulfill our need for close-knit social units. I hypothesize that one community in the far north, known as *Simply Core Alaska* serves as a family-community-like unit for Individuals. While Simply Core is a group fitness class, my hypothesis grew from my belief that it is more than an exercise class based on my own personal experiences as a transplant to Alaska. Simply Core Alaska reflects a frontier community culture wherein members warm up to one another quickly, accept one another regardless of fitness levels, and support one another through personal struggles.

This Project explores Alaskans' need for community, considering the experiences of Indigenous individuals and transplants like myself. Chapter One, illustrates that from the beginning of time, community has been essential to the survival of Alaska Natives. Chapter Two introduces Melodee Morris, founder and creator of Simply Core Alaska's program of simultaneous physical and mental fitness. Chapter Three presents survey data from Core participants. The final chapters synthesize findings from interviews and spontaneous conversations with Core participants to analyze Simply Core Alaska's value and meaning both individually and collectively.

Acknowledgements

My Masters of Arts program in Arctic & Northern Studies began the fall of 2009. In the course of the last several years, prior to reaching the checkered flag, a series of starts and long pauses transpired. Early into this degree, I donned the slogan of my Masters program: *The Era of the Tortoise*. The tortoise does win the race, however slow she may be. Eight years after my first graduate seminar, I write in thanksgiving and gratitude.

To my committee, my academic cheerleaders: Dr. Mary Ehrlander, your fortitude in seeing the completion of this race reaches beyond words of thank you. It is because of you that I desire to never stop practicing the art of writing. Dr. Terrence Cole, from the onset of this race with Dr. Ehrlander, your investment of time, research sources, words of truth and perspective have shaped this completed race. Professor Veronica Plumb, you have remained committed to this race even after I shifted projects mid-lap, when I first shared this research idea with you. I would be remiss to think this race finished on my own. You each have made me a better writer, student and professional. Thank you.

To Melodee Faith Morris, the originator and founder of *Simply Core Alaska*: Mel, thank you for the opportunity and privilege to write our story of Core. May what inspires life change within the studio continue to transform lives for years to come. I smile at what Core has become. Thank you for your vision, dedication and perseverance these past nine years, since my first class at the Alaska Club. I love you Mel.

To my family, Donna and Jerry Main: You've supported your daughter as I ventured North and remain in this Far North place, the home of my heart. Julianne and Tim Brock, my sister and brother in law, I smile at your love and support over these years. Ricky and Hannah Brock, my nephew and niece, I love you both so much. You are two beautiful children whose spirits resemble the adventure of the Far North. My cousins Linda, Celia and Mary: You have simply not let up your exhortation that I finish this race. I love you all.

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To Hild Peters: Thank you for coffee dates and reflections throughout this process. It is now time to research and publish together. Thank you for your friendship from our first graduate seminar class.

To my Lord, my Jesus. Lord God, this race started on the banks of the River Yukon, peeling spruce logs. Raw timbers caked with mud, stripped to their gleaming and innermost parts. You orchestrated my venture to this Far North place. Jesus, I love You. My desire, all this life, is to serve You first, and only. I praise You for the completion of this race.

Introduction: Preparation of Community—Where it All Began

Core Class: September 24, 2016

“Why do you come here??!!” an explosive voice from the fit and petite instructor shouts across the studio. “Come on Mike, you’ve got this!!!,” Melodee Morris yells. Mike steps once more in beat with the cardio routine as beads of sweat dot his face. Music and lyrics created to inspire physical movement boom around the forty men and women in the class, at all fitness levels, some in rhythm, others not. Participants follow the woman wearing black leggings and a pink shirt as she smiles, shouts and pounds her feet on the floor. “One, two, switch!”

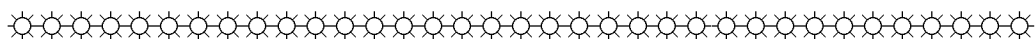
I am here, at this Saturday noon class, while a plethora of other activities in Fairbanks compete for my attention. My arms are heavy after a four-minute arm routine we finished a few minutes ago. Thirty minutes into this ninety-minute class, I wonder “How will I make it?” I close my eyes, take a breath. “Yes, I can do this. I am doing this,” I tell myself. At the same time, I know that I will wake up tomorrow morning and want to yell, “Melodee, do you feel this same pain in your upper body and abs as I do today?”

“I just wanna live tonight, I just wanna live my life!” New song lyrics stream through the studio speakers while sweat permeates clothes throughout the room. “Tuck that tailbone under, REACH!” Melodee shouts at the end of the song. Bodies and limbs move together. Oddly enough, there are smiles throughout the room in this *Cardio Madness*, as class veterans regularly refer to the routine. This is a lifestyle. It’s a lifestyle and community in a sub-Arctic setting with a harsh climate and limited winter light. A journey, begun for many participants with personal goals, has evolved into a community of shared purpose. This is Simply Core Alaska.

Human beings are intrinsically wired to live in community. Living in the harsh northern environment of Alaska's Interior increases the need for human connection. Native peoples of Alaska have survived for millennia in seemingly inhospitable environments by living in tight-knit communities. Because transiency is unusually high in Alaska, many non-Native Alaskans live far from their birth families and communities. They therefore must take steps to form support networks or communities upon their arrival here.

The concept of community takes many forms, differing according to culture, beliefs and demographics. One community in Alaska's Interior that joins together year round to share challenges and successes while navigating long winters, limited daylight, and geographic isolation is known as Simply Core Alaska. After years of teaching physical fitness at the Alaska Club and completing her Masters degree in Community Counseling at the University of Alaska Fairbanks, Melodee Morris ventured out on her own to design a physical fitness class that not only focuses on physical, but mental, emotional and social health. From an initial class at the Artisan's Courtyard nearly ten years ago to classes nearly every day today, Melodee has cultivated a program for men and women in Fairbanks who not only work on their own health goals, but support one another in the community the program has fostered.

This MA project is a case study of the Simply Core Alaska experience. Using surveys and interviews of Core members and published narratives of Alaska Native elders, this project analyzes Simply Core Alaska as a community within this sub-Arctic setting. Although merely surviving is not the struggle it once was in Interior Alaska, Fairbanksans still require human companionship and community to thrive.



In June 2004 I spent one week on the banks of the Yukon River, at Kokrine Hills Bible Camp. I worked with a team from my home base in Portland, Oregon to prepare the camp for the upcoming summer season. At the time, I knew little about Alaska, besides enjoying a cruise to the north four years earlier. Toward the end of the week, I helped peel newly timbered logs. Using a homemade flat iron tool, I peeled spruce logs that would later be used in building cabins. As I stripped caked mud and debris off a log, a gleaming, unsoiled timber revealed itself. It was only after the dirty exterior sloughed off that I noticed the natural splendor of the log, long protected by its coarse exterior. What I recognized, but could not express on that day, was that our souls harbor our essential selves that our mouths often cannot express.

Witnessing this transformation of the spruce log resonated deeply with me. Like the wooden log, existing in its dirty, mud-laden cocoon, and emerging sparkling clean, I was in a season of a cleansing metamorphosis as well. It had taken twenty years to reach this healing place. I believe that the most profound changes in our lives often occur at completely unexpected times and places. My journey to Kokrine Hills Bible Camp was such an experience.

Thirteen years ago, my trip to Interior Alaska, to the banks of the Yukon River, altered my life forever. As we flew home later that week, my eyes glistening with tears, I knew it would only be a matter of time until I returned to this place that already felt like home. I returned to Alaska four summers later and have remained here since. Alaska is the home of my heart.

As a transplant to Alaska in 2008, I knew few people. A couple of months after arriving in Fairbanks, I joined the Alaska Club. Having always struggled with my weight, I knew that I needed to join a gym, or at least an exercise class. One Tuesday morning, I participated in the Alaska Club's core strength class; knowing no one, I stayed in the back. While I don't remember much about that first class, I do remember the instructor was kind and encouraging, and she

challenged the whole class to work hard. Her name was Melodee Morris. On my first day in class, she helped me feel included. What started for me the day I met Melodee would become as essential as breathing. I had found something I did not want to live without.

Melodee established her own studio several months after my first core class, and I naturally followed. The move to Simply Core Alaska transpired almost eight years ago. Since then, I have pushed myself harder both physically and mentally than I ever thought possible. I have shared moments of angst and celebration with others, as we grimace at Melodee during challenging sequences and cheer spontaneously after completing fast-moving cardio routines.

In the course of my Masters of Arts program in Arctic & Northern Studies, I have found myself frustrated several times at not making the progress necessary to finish. Throughout my time in the program, whether pushed by frustration with my academic journey, or work-related stress, I kept returning to Core. Meanwhile, I have developed friendships within this group, and we naturally check in with each other before and after class. As we have striven to meet individual goals within this community, we have become family. Recently it occurred to me that it is only natural to explore with other Core participants how we have experienced the personal transformation and social benefits of participating in Simply Core Alaska. Thus began this project.

In the following chapters, I will explore Alaskans' need for community, considering the experiences of Indigenous individuals and transplants like myself. In Chapter One, I will illustrate that from the beginning of time, community has been essential to the survival of Alaska Natives. I will rely on Velma Wallis' *Two Old Women* and life histories or autobiographies of Alaska Natives to illustrate the need for companionship. Judith Kleinfeld's *Frontier Romance* analyzes the essential roles communities play in the lives of Alaskan transplants, whether they

arrive in pursuit of individualist or communal goals. Chapter Two introduces Melodee Morris, founder and creator of Simply Core Alaska's program of simultaneous physical and mental fitness. Chapter Three presents survey data from Core participants. The final chapter synthesizes findings from interviews and spontaneous conversations with Core participants to analyze Simply Core Alaska's value and meaning both individually and collectively.

Chapter 1: Community among Alaska's Indigenous peoples and Northern Transplants

Indigenous knowledge transfers from one generation to the next orally, often through story telling. *Two Old Women*, by Velma Wallis, illustrates lessons of survival and community in Alaska, prior to Western contact. In their memoirs, Alaska Native elders Sidney Huntington and Willie Hensley present narratives of growing up in rugged and rural Alaska during the twentieth century. Judith Kleinfeld relates the experiences of numerous non-native transplants to Alaska's Interior. Each of these publications highlights the challenges of living in the far north, and each illustrates Alaskans' reliance on one another, on family and community, for survival.

Two Old Women by Velma Wallis is an Athabaskan legend of abandon, collaboration, survival, community and reunion among a group of Gwich'in Athabaskan people long before Westerners arrived in Alaska.¹ In the midst of a winter famine, the band leaves two Elders behind; the younger members of the band simply cannot support them. These two women were known to complain, to claim they were too old for work, and to let others provide for them. The chief arrived at the conclusion that in order for the people to survive, the two Elders would have to be left behind. The group moved on, leaving Ch'idzigyaak (age 80) and Sa' (age 75) with one hatchet, a few strings of caribou hide (babiche) and their own tent. The tribe expected the two women to perish, never to be seen by their family again.

Left on their own, the women remembered skills learned in childhood, like making snow shoes and setting rabbit snares, as they strove to survive. Each woman comforted the other, as tears of abandon, shame, frustration, loss, and anger rolled down their faces. Knowing that the long winter approached, they collaborated on a plan to make the arduous journey to an

¹ Gwich'in Athabaskan people traditionally live in Alaska's northeastern Interior, along the Upper Yukon River, near Fort Yukon and the confluence of the Yukon and Porcupine Rivers.

abandoned fish camp of their childhood. Wallis explains their journey to winter camp in these words: “They stumbled numbly on, many times falling down into the snow from sheer fatigue and old age. Yet they pushed on, almost in desperation, knowing that each step brought them nearer to their destination.”² Each woman took care to assist the other, leaning against the other in sleep, pulling one another from their snow hut in the morning and walking together, one step at a time to reach the winter camp.³

On the sixth day of walking in deep snow and in frigid temperatures, the two women found their long abandoned fish camp. As the two bonded, forming their own little community, they began sharing stories and lessons learned in younger years. Sa’ shared a story from her youth, when she rebelled against her own band and they left her behind with an Elder who later died. She related the importance of community to Ch’idzigyaak in this way, “Then I realized the importance of being with a large group. The body needs food, but the mind needs people.”⁴

Sharing stories of their youth created a feeling of home for each of the women. A dialogue, initially sparse and focused on survival, transformed into a steady conversation between the two, as they developed respect and community in each other.⁵ They survived that winter together through their communion with one another and their determination to persevere. Throughout the following spring, summer and fall, they harvested wild game, salmon, and wood in preparation for the coming winter.

² Velma Wallis, *Two Old Women*, 10th ed, (Seattle: Epicenter Press, 1994), 37.

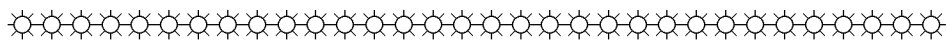
³ Wallis, *Two Old Women*, 41, 47.

⁴ Wallis, *Two Old Women*, 65.

⁵ Wallis, *Two Old Women*, 67-69.

As they prepared for winter, each woman experienced moments of longing and worry about the fate of the People. Their band, who had struggled to survive through the harsh winter before, had wrestled with guilt and had also worried about the two old women. Finding no trace of the women at their original camp, the chief sent out a search party for the women. Again, the People were not prepared for the impending winter, when limited game would be available. At last, the scouting party found the women.⁶

Slowly, the trust that had been destroyed between the women and the People began to rebuild, as they allowed visitors to their camp. The People's respect for the women grew as they discovered the women used their knowledge and skill sets to provide for themselves throughout the previous winter. Wallis writes, "now they realized that because the two women had lived so long, surely they knew a lot more than the People had believed."⁷ Ch'idzigyaak's family asked her forgiveness and the People vowed never to leave an Elder behind again.⁸ The People revived their community, not only as a survival method, but owing to restored trust, love and a sense of family.



The late Sidney Huntington, a Koyukon Athabaskan Elder partnered with author Jim Reardon in his autobiography, *Shadows on the Koyukuk*. Huntington's life story brims with illustrations of deep reliance on family and community. Determined to return to her children after a murder trial required her testimony in Nome, Huntington's mother, Anna, travelled over four hundred miles on foot to her home on the Kobuk River. No one had attempted such a trek

⁶ Wallis, *Two Old Women*, 109-121.

⁷ Wallis, *Two Old Women*, 128.

⁸ Wallis, *Two Old Women*, 128-136.

before, especially in the winter. The journey took her through the “no man’s land” between Inupiat and Athabaskan territory. From the inception of her trip to her arrival home, Anna received food, shelter, supplies and moccasins from both Alaska Natives and miners living along her route.⁹

Huntington’s father, James Huntington, Anna’s second husband, was a man of many occupations and talents, who often traveled throughout the Interior. When Sidney was four years old, he accompanied his dad on a supply trip to the mine at Bear Creek. Along the way, James fell sick and asked Sidney to find help. After walking all day, Sidney encountered Dominic Verneti, a miner with a thick Italian accent, and family friend, who located James with Sidney’s help and brought him to other miners in the area. Sidney recalled that Dominic and the other miners “nursed Dad for many days before he could take to the trail again.”¹⁰ Years later, Dominic Verneti remarked to other miners not familiar with the story, “ ‘Dis Keed is wort’ his weight in gold.’ ”¹¹

At age five, when their father was away, Sidney and his two younger siblings spent two weeks surviving alone, after Anna died of food poisoning. Unable to seek help by land, with black bears on the trail, or by the turbulent Hog River, Sidney cared for his brother and baby sister as the children waited for help to arrive. After two weeks, the steamship *Teddy H* passed their house, and the captain stopped, sensing something was amiss. Missionaries on board took the children under their care and they travelled six miles down river, where they met their father.

⁹ Sidney Huntington and Jim Rearden, *Shadows on the Koyukuk: An Alaskan Native’s Life Along the River* (Seattle: Alaska Northwest Books, 1993), 19-22.

¹⁰ Huntington and Rearden, *Shadows on the Koyukuk*, 29.

¹¹ Huntington and Rearden, *Shadows on the Koyukuk*, 65.

Many from the Athabaskan Koyukon community gathered for Anna's memorial potlatch.¹² The memorial potlatch exemplifies the value of sharing that lies at the core of Athabaskan society and that fosters community.

Following Anna's death, James Huntington, unable to care for his five children, sent Sidney and his brother Jimmy to the Episcopal Mission at Anvik, which housed many orphaned children and others whose parents could not feed and clothe them. Sidney recalled, "The missions had an open door for all, including children sent by their parents to be educated, because there were few public schools for them."¹³ Sidney's experience at Anvik left a lasting impression on him. He recalled that one of the most important lessons he learned at the mission was, "the obligation all of us have to try to help those in need."¹⁴

Years later as a young man, Sidney applied his lesson from Anvik. Native guide George Butler and Charlie Irish from Wiseman stopped with their dog team, at the Huntingtons' cabin on the Koyukuk River for refuge between trips to complete the census in January 1929. This was one of the most severe winters on record, when the temperature remained at 50 degrees below zero or colder through most of the month. Traveling in such temperatures greatly increases the likelihood of frostbite. As Jimmy and Sidney heard the dog team approaching their cabin, they swiftly prepared shelter for the team and held up a lantern to guide their safe arrival.¹⁵ During their stay, Charlie's dogs depleted their supply of food, and the Huntingtons shared food of their

¹²Huntington and Rearden, *Shadows on the Koyukuk*, 33-40.

¹³Huntington and Rearden, *Shadows on the Koyukuk*, 43.

¹⁴Huntington and Rearden, *Shadows on the Koyukuk*, 48.

¹⁵Huntington and Rearden, *Shadows on the Koyukuk*, 92-93.

own. Sidney recounted that once Charlie reached the closest trading post in Hughes, he repaid the Huntingtons with a sled load of dog food.¹⁶

Two months later, in March, Sidney decided to build his own boat. James Huntington encouraged him in this endeavor, “ Don’t let anything stump you; you can do whatever you set your mind to.”¹⁷ This wisdom from his father remained with Sidney throughout his life. He recalled, “I had no lumber, no nails and had never built a boat.”¹⁸ While he was not yet thirteen years old, Sidney was “undaunted” at the challenge of building a boat on his own after James Huntington and family friend Charlie Swanson explained to him the steps.¹⁹

At the outset, Sidney did not have enough nails. Using his resourcefulness, he pulled nails from boxes and the cabin’s walls. Sidney attributed the boat’s completion to a combination of his own determination and help from James, Jimmy and Charlie. Sidney later reflected, “I finished my boat just three days before breakup. I have never been prouder of anything I have accomplished than I was of that boat.”²⁰

The early part of the twentieth century brought several traders and miners to Alaska’s Interior after the discovery of gold at Dawson and later in Nome. Sidney noted that traders and storekeepers did not become rich off the Natives along the Yukon and Koyukuk.²¹ Storekeepers often extended credit to both Natives and whites for provisions for the approaching winter or in

¹⁶Huntington and Rearden, *Shadows on the Koyukuk*, 93.

¹⁷Huntington and Rearden, *Shadows on the Koyukuk*, 95.

¹⁸ Huntington and Rearden, *Shadows on the Koyukuk*, 95.

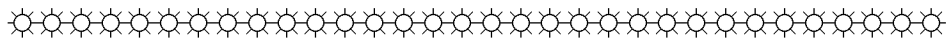
¹⁹ Huntington and Rearden, *Shadows on the Koyukuk*, 95.

²⁰Huntington and Rearden, *Shadows on the Koyukuk*, 98.

²¹Huntington and Rearden, *Shadows on the Koyukuk*, 112.

another time of need. Breakup in 1929 on the Koyukuk River led to a major flood, destroying the Huntingtons cabin and cache. Sidney recalled that he and his brother thought the “world had come to an end.”²² Pop Russell, a trader from Nulato learned of the flood’s devastation, and he extended his own resources to a reluctant James Huntington for the following winter. Pop stated to James, “I’ll give you what you need. Pay what you can. I’ll catch up with you next spring.”²³ In the eyes of twelve year old Sidney, “Pop Russell was a prince.”²⁴

As it had prior to Western contact, community remained essential for surviving and thriving within Alaska’s Interior into the twentieth century. Sidney Huntington’s biography *Shadows on the Koyukuk* reflected this reality: living in the far north required not only resourcefulness and a strong place-based skill set, but it necessitated resilient family and community bonds.



“It is difficult to overstate the importance of family in the Inupiat world,” Alaska Native elder William L. Iggiagruk Hensley imparts at the beginning of his memoir *Fifty Miles from Tomorrow*.²⁵ Hensley draws the reader in as he relates the beauty and harsh realities of mid-twentieth century life in Northwest Alaska. In the Kotzebue region where Hensley grew up, winters stretched nine months, heating oil was scarce, and houses did not have electricity. Each member of the family contributed to the daily struggle of survival.²⁶

²²Huntington and Rearden, *Shadows on the Koyukuk*, 111.

²³William L. Iggiagruk Hensley, *Fifty Miles from Tomorrow: A Memoir of Alaska and the Real People*, 1st ed (New York: Picador, 2010), 18.

²⁴ Hensley, *Fifty Miles from Tomorrow*, 18.

²⁵Hensley, *Fifty Miles from Tomorrow*, 18.

²⁶Hensley, *Fifty Miles from Tomorrow*, 16.

When he was just three years old, Hensley's mother's first cousin, Fred adopted him and his older sister Saigulik. Fred Hensley had found Willie and Saigulik "in terrible shape—abused, malnourished, badly clothed and living in squalor" in Nome.²⁷ Willie declares that moving to Kotzebue was the best thing that ever happened to him. During his elementary school years, Hensley realized that he and other peers "were nurtured into adulthood by loving extended families."²⁸ He grew up learning his traditional Inupiaq ways and flourished within his adoptive family. At the same time, "we were learning as our forefathers had learned: by surviving in one of the most hostile climates on earth."²⁹

Hensley fills his memoir with stories of family and friends who supported, encouraged and provided for him throughout his childhood, adolescence and adulthood. One such person, Dick Miller, a missionary from Mississippi, mentored Willie to "find another path" for high school and assisted with sending him Outside to school.³⁰ At age fifteen, Willie boarded an airplane headed for Harrison-Chilhowee Baptist Academy, in Seymour, Tennessee.³¹ Hensley, as a stranger in an entirely new environment, wondered if he would make friends. He recalls the beginning of his community experience in these words: "So far from family and friends and homeland, I wondered whether I would ever fit into this strange environment. But as so often is the case, little by little I got to know my classmates and they got to know me."³² Willie made

²⁷Hensley, *Fifty Miles from Tomorrow*, 14.

²⁸Hensley, *Fifty Miles from Tomorrow*, 13.

²⁹Hensley, *Fifty Miles from Tomorrow*, 70.

³⁰Hensley, *Fifty Miles from Tomorrow*, 83.

³¹Hensley, *Fifty Miles from Tomorrow*, 83, 88.

³²Hensley, *Fifty Miles from Tomorrow*, 90.

several friends during the four years he lived in Tennessee. His classmates voted him Best All-Around his senior year. Nevertheless, throughout his high school experience, Hensley increasingly missed Alaska.

Hensley returned home for a few years before once again venturing Outside to earn a Bachelor's degree at George Washington University in Washington, D.C. The 1960s was a turbulent decade for the United States. The Civil Rights Movement, which started in the South, spread to Indigenous communities as well. Hensley graduated in 1966, two years before the discovery of oil in Alaska and returned to Kotzebue, where he found his childhood home destroyed after being auctioned off by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM).³³

Throughout his autobiography, Hensley emphasizes the strength derived from family and community among Inupiaq people. Between 1966 and 1971, Hensley steadfastly advocated for the return of Native lands to the people. Hensley joined with other Native leaders to form the Alaska Federation of Natives (AFN) to pursue their land claims collectively before and after the discovery of oil at Prudhoe Bay in 1968.³⁴ The historic passage of ANCSA (the Alaska Native Claims Settlements Act) on December 18, 1971 finally recognized aboriginal land claims of Alaska Natives and provided millions of dollars in addition to the formation of thirteen Alaska Native corporations, which hold the assets from the land claims settlement.

³³Hensley, *Fifty Miles from Tomorrow*, 110; Claus-M. Naske and Herman E. Slotnick, *Alaska: A History* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2011) 283, 290. Following Alaska's statehood in 1959, the state began selecting the 103 million acres the federal government had allocated it under the statehood act. These selections raised alarm among Alaska Natives, whose own aboriginal land claims remained unsettled. Contention over Alaska Native land claims led U.S. Secretary of the Interior Stewart Udall to impose a "land freeze" in the state, halting the further selection of state lands until Alaska Native Land Claims had been settled.

³⁴Today, AFN meets yearly in either Anchorage or Fairbanks, drawing thousands of people from throughout the state to discuss matters of political, economic, social and cultural concern and to maintain family and community ties.

In the early years of ANCSA's implementation, and with the building of the Trans-Alaska Pipeline, the rapid pace of political and economic activity exacerbated long-standing social problems within Alaska Native communities. Hensley described what he saw: "We were not starving or freezing the way we used to and our health care facilities were improving. But there was a yawning pit out there, and in spite of our best efforts, we were sliding downhill, straight into it. We were becoming alcoholic or violent, committing suicide, neglecting children, beating wives, and going to jail in greater numbers than ever before."³⁵ In short, the physical and mental health among Native peoples, in Hensley's observations had alarmingly declined.

Hensley further reflected, "Now here we were, running about in a frenzy, planning and accounting and investing and managing and traveling. Without realizing it, I and my Inupiaqati had allowed our spirit and culture to take a back seat to pressing corporate and political issues."³⁶ Furthermore, Hensley connected the multitude of multi-generational scars to westernization and assimilation of Alaska Native peoples. The Inupiat were hearing the message that their "way of life was doomed."³⁷

Hensley, seen as a leader in Kotzebue for the last fifteen years, gathered Kotzebue at the Kotzebue Community Center. He spoke earnestly to those assembled, "If we don't want to survive as Inupiaq people, the thing to do is nothing. ... But if we do want to survive as a people, what is it that was good about us?"³⁸ After a moment of silence from the seventy-five people in attendance, several shared their beliefs. Hensley recounted in his memoir, "I jotted down the

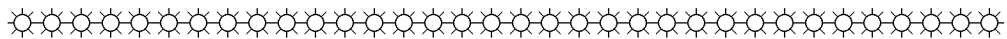
³⁵ Hensley, *Fifty Miles from Tomorrow*, 202.

³⁶ Hensley, *Fifty Miles from Tomorrow*, 214.

³⁷ Hensley, *Fifty Miles from Tomorrow*, 217.

³⁸ Hensley, *Fifty Miles from Tomorrow*, 217.

qualities they described on a piece of paper mounted on an easel. The words and phrases were probably obvious to the elders among us in the room. But in that room, on that day, they were seriously contemplated for the first time by new generations.”³⁹ People in the room used several terms to describe Inupiaq culture and community including language knowledge, cooperation, sharing, respect for others, respect for elders, knowledge of family tree, responsibility to tribe, family roles and love of children, all of which strongly reflect the importance of family and community in Inupiaq culture.⁴⁰ Hensley recounted his thoughts of the meeting in these words, “We had managed to capture the essence of our special way of life. All who attended now had a standard by which they could measure their lives and the institutions to which they were connected.”⁴¹ This episode and Hensley’s reflections upon it leave no doubt of the centrality of family and community to traditional Inupiaq life-ways.



Judith Kleinfeld, in *The Frontier Romance: Environment, Culture and Alaska Identity*, explores the motivations and experiences of individuals who have moved to Alaska from the Lower 48.⁴² Her chapter titled *The Pioneer Women* presents the experiences of ten women who moved to Alaska independently and found community among other women in their quilting circle in Central. The small, unincorporated mining town lies approximately two hours’ drive northeast of Fairbanks. Each of the women Kleinfeld interviewed expressed a unique reason why she chose the wilderness over the city. Their choices led them to draw upon their own

³⁹Hensley, *Fifty Miles from Tomorrow*, 218.

⁴⁰Hensley, *Fifty Miles from Tomorrow*, 218 .

⁴¹Hensley, *Fifty Miles from Tomorrow*, 219.

⁴²Judith Kleinfeld, *The Frontier Romance: Environment, Culture and Alaska Identity* (Fairbanks: University of Alaska Press, 2012).

resourcefulness. Commodities and conveniences are not as readily available in Central as they are in Alaska's cities.

Surrounded by wilderness, these women had to be prepared for harsh realities. Laurel, one of the pioneer women, recounted to Kleinfeld that she shot a bear that attempted to get into her father-in-law's tent when the family was caribou hunting.⁴³ On the other hand, community members rely on and share with one another. People share resources and barter their labor as families help one another.

Kleinfeld found that the women of Central constructed a "pioneer community" that filled the women's social needs.⁴⁴ At the same time, Kleinfeld noted "Their narratives displayed their pride in their self-sufficiency and competence."⁴⁵ These women were transplants to Alaska, who lived intentionally as pioneer women. Yet each chose to foster community with other families while living independently from many of the trappings of the more materially-oriented societies in urban Alaska and Outside.

Another community Kleinfeld visited in the process of researching her book is located outside of Delta Junction, roughly two hours' drive southeast of Fairbanks. Whitestone Farms, a religious community is not on any map and accessible only by ice road in the winter or boat in the summer.⁴⁶ Bill and Bette Grier founded Whitestone Farms in 1982 as a spiritual community. The Griers, originally from Claremont, New Hampshire, believed God was calling his congregation to live in a community away from mainstream society. They felt called to live

⁴³Kleinfeld, *The Frontier Romance*, 19.

⁴⁴Kleinfeld, *The Frontier Romance*, 21.

⁴⁵Kleinfeld, *The Frontier Romance*, 20.

⁴⁶Kleinfeld, *The Frontier Romance*, 51.

together communally in the wilderness.⁴⁷ This included relinquishing the “materialistic, competitive, self-absorbed life styles of people in the surrounding world, to the degree they could.”⁴⁸

Between 1981 and 1982, members of the congregation took turns traveling from New Hampshire to Alaska, as they shared their labor to build the homestead. Community members also liquidated their assets to provide the funds to build their new community. Nineteen original members celebrated their first Thanksgiving together in 1982.⁴⁹ Kleinfeld wrote, “The people of Whitestone Farms saw their journey to Alaska as retracing the tale of the American founding.”⁵⁰

Residents shared daily chores including gardening, baking, animal husbandry, and laundry. Men and women divided daily work amongst themselves without complaint, for they were unified in their mission to serve and care for each other. Richard Greenleaf, an elder at Whitestone Farms, described the mission each individual undertook daily, “You can’t be so given to work, to a project, that you aren’t taking care of people, honoring them and respecting them by giving them your full attention.”⁵¹ Essentially, Whitestone Farms represents a twenty-first century spiritual frontier.

In contrast to the women of Central, members of Whitestone Farms moved to Alaska with the intent of forming a community. Nevertheless, both groups illustrate the role that community plays in human survival on the frontier. The following chapter recounts how

⁴⁷Kleinfeld, *The Frontier Romance*, 70.

⁴⁸Kleinfeld, *The Frontier Romance*, 70.

⁴⁹Kleinfeld, *The Frontier Romance*, 61-62.

⁵⁰Kleinfeld, *The Frontier Romance*, 62.

⁵¹Kleinfeld, *The Frontier Romance*, 69.

Melodee Morris moved to Alaska and eventually initiated a close-knit community within Fairbanks.

Chapter Two: Melodee Faith Morris
The woman behind Simply Core Alaska-Creating a community where all are welcome

And every time I teach, I am shocked by it all,
Melodee Faith Morris, February 6, 2017

From a young age, Melodee Morris was drawn to music and dance. Like many young girls, Melodee created dances and sang for her family. Song and dance represented more than a childhood pastime. Her mother mirrored their basement to encourage Melodee's dancing. Melodee spent hours in her basement, dancing, and singing to records. She recently recalled, "I danced every single day, creating shows and making my family and friends come and sit for a couple hours to watch my performances."⁵² Between childhood and adolescence, Melodee also participated in a variety of arts classes at school. She took tap classes, jazz dance, sang in choir, and performed in plays. In short, her passion for the Performing Arts and dance reached farther than the school theatre.

One such dance creation earned her step father's praise. At age seven, Melodee enlisted her sister to help organize a formal show her step father asked her to create for an upcoming dinner party with business associates at their house. Her step father was the general manager for one of Denver's television stations. In preparation for her show, she designed costumes, choreography, make-up, and programs. As Melodee sang and danced to several songs, including, "Hopelessly Devoted to You," by Olivia Newton John, not only did her step father recognize her talent, but her performance resonated deeply with him. Generally speaking, he rarely offered praise, but he saw "something very special in me" that day, Melodee recalls.⁵³ He was so moved

⁵² Melodee Morris, text message to author, April 7, 2017.

⁵³ Morris, April 7, 2017.

that he convinced Melodee's mother to move to Beverly Hills, where Melodee would enroll in acting and dance classes to develop her natural talent. Unexpectedly, her step-father died a month after the family started preparing to leave Colorado. Melodee's childhood dreams of dancing and performing on a larger stage abruptly ended.

Melodee remained in Colorado after her step-father's death until early adulthood. In time, she returned to dance, which was her "happy place," her "escape" and a place she could travel to in her mind and experience through her body.⁵⁴ Melodee participated in several dramatic productions within the arts department and participated in other activities in high school. Dance for Melodee was the greatest freedom of expression and means of healing she knew. Throughout her youth, dancing was Melodee's constant source of shelter from the struggles of life. At the age of 24, feeling the need to reconnect with her birth father, she struck out for Alaska.

Melodee's first ten years in Alaska from 1995 to 2005, passed in a whirlwind of family activity as she reestablished her relationship with her father, married, and devoted herself to raising two young children. These years yielded limited time for music and dance. In 2005, she started teaching cycling classes at the Alaska Club as a part time job. The Alaska Club provided the opportunity for Melodee to obtain fitness credentials. Melodee earned national certifications from both Athletics and Fitness Association of America (AFAA) and the American Council on Exercise (ACE).⁵⁵ These two organizations are nationally recognized for evidence-based

⁵⁴Morris, April 7, 2017.

⁵⁵"About AFAA. Change Bodies. Change Lives," Athletics and Fitness Association of America (AFAA), accessed March 12, 2017, <http://www.afaa.com/about>.

practices in group fitness and instruction.⁵⁶ Since 1983, AFAA has certified over 350,000 personal trainers who undergo training in safety practices, science-based study in physical fitness, and hands on training.⁵⁷ Similarly, guided by evidence-based research, ACE trains fitness instructors across America to teach classes at any ability level, to model safety, and to emphasize correct form at all times.⁵⁸

Two years after instructing her first cycling class, her mentor and fitness director encouraged Melodee to extend her leadership in group fitness to include the club's group core fitness class. Generally speaking, the term 'core' refers to activities and exercises which, "train the muscles in your pelvis, lower back, hips and abdomen to work in harmony. This leads to better balance and stability, whether on the playing field or in daily activities,"⁵⁹ as a Mayo Clinic fitness website explains. The music incorporated within the core class rekindled her deep love for what she once knew. She recalled in a recent interview, "When I started teaching at the Alaska Club, I tapped back into that, that deep connection and started trying to be creative. . . . I could not let go of this."⁶⁰ Eventually her love of dance as a musical and exercise outlet would lead her to launch her own studio. As Melodee contemplated future prospects, she finished her Master's program in Community Counseling at the University of Alaska Fairbanks. Her research

⁵⁶"About Improving Patient Outcomes with Science-Based Expertise," American Council on Exercise (ACE), accessed March 12, 2017, <https://www.acefitness.org/health/about.aspx>.

⁵⁷"About AFAA."

⁵⁸ "About Improving Patient Outcomes with Science-Based Expertise."

⁵⁹ "Core exercises: Why you should strengthen your core muscles," Mayo Clinic , accessed, April 17, 2017, <http://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/fitness/in-depth/core-exercises/art-20044751>. Developing a strong "core" leads to a strong and healthier body, including toning muscles and assisting in the fat burn of cardio activity. "Core exercises can help tone your abs," Mayo Clinic, accessed April 17, 2017, <http://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/fitness/in-depth/core-exercises/art-20044751?pg=2>.

⁶⁰Morris, interview by author, Fairbanks, Alaska, February 6, 2017.

focused on the connection between physical and mental health, specifically, *Exercise as an Adjunct to Clinical Practice*.⁶¹ Melodee's academic research reinforced her belief that body and mind connections in physical exercise produce more viable benefits than traditional exercise programs.⁶² She started a research project that evolved into a product she now lives by. She recounts:

I was working on my Master's and . . . was trying to determine what I was going to do with my thesis, and first (I) was going to (research) sex offenders (where my internships were), and then I thought, I need to write about what I really know, what I really feel and what is passionate, what is part of me, that is my heart, and that is the connection between mental health and exercise. And the connection between the body, the mind, the spirit, the heart, and emotions, everything.⁶³

Melodee found that during the early 1960s, scientists started connecting the benefits of physical exercise and physical health. Continued research throughout the 1970s resulted in publications exploring the relationship between physical fitness, cognition and general well being. Further research done between the 1980s and 1990s revealed "the connection between exercise and stress reduction, aging, appetite, obesity, brain function and disease prevention."⁶⁴ Since 2000, scientists continue to explore connections between physical exercise, cognition and mental health.

⁶¹"The Team," Simply Core, accessed March 28, 2017, <http://www.simplyCorealaska.com/team.html>.

⁶² Melodee Morris, "Physical and Mental Health, Exercise as a Possible Adjunct to Clinical Practice" (MA project, University of Alaska Fairbanks, 2011).

⁶³Morris, February 6, 2017.

⁶⁴ Morris, "Physical and Mental Health," 7.

John Ratey, clinical professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School, writes in his 2008 book *Spark: The Revolutionary New Science of Exercise and the Brain*, “studies show that by adding physical activity to our lives, we become more socially active—it boosts our confidence and provides an opportunity to meet people. The vigor and motivation that exercise brings helps us establish and maintain social connections.”⁶⁵ Melodee used both her own intuition and academic research to substantiate what her heart knew since she was a child: music, dance and physical movement provide an avenue to life change, healing, community development and even family.

A year into her graduate school program, one of the participants in Melodee’s classes at the Alaska Club learned she was considering branching out on her own.⁶⁶ This individual encouraged Melodee to meet with the owner of the Artisan’s Courtyard.⁶⁷ After a series of conversations, Melodee signed a rental agreement with Sherri Merdes. In late Spring 2010, long standing dreams and anticipation came to fruition when Melodee left the Alaska Club.

As a new business owner, Melodee stepped out onto her own new frontier. Melodee formed the business, Simply Core Alaska and created her own acronym for the word Core. Core, within her business stands for: *Center of Raw Energy*. The acronym rests on the idea that our core muscles are the powerhouses for all of the energy a person needs to maintain balance,

⁶⁵ John J. Ratey, *Spark: The Revolutionary New Science of Exercise and the Brain* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2008), 70.

⁶⁶ Melodee Morris, text message to author, April 7, 2017.

⁶⁷ Artisan’s Courtyard is a local business in Fairbanks offering various exercise classes through the use of its three studios.

perform daily activities, and exert physical energy while working out and strengthening our bodies.⁶⁸ The acronym CORE acts as a template to follow in each class.

Not surprisingly, Melodee experienced a certain level of anxiety and fear as her classes began. She candidly expressed her trepidation in a recent conversation. She recalled various initial thoughts, including feeling like a fraud, having trouble believing that she had actually taken this step, and wondering "are they just going to see some girl?"⁶⁹ Melodee's personal apprehensions as the leader of brand new classes mirrored those of people attending their first classes. Melodee long held in her heart the vision for Simply Core Alaska. She now prepared to execute her plan.

Initially, she offered one choreographed class. Early mat classes included using one's own body weight as resistance to help tone the body. Melodee and her husband were shocked at the response from participants within the first few weeks and months. People were returning, asking for more classes, and waiting in line to buy punch cards after participating. Within a few months, Melodee introduced a warm up routine with cardio moves before floor work on the mat. The popularity of the warm up cardio routine resulted in the first Cardio Core class. Melodee has since introduced a total body toning class using folding chairs, an evening dance class with strobe lights, and an hour-and-a-half demonstration class on Saturdays.

The program has become not only a new form of group fitness, but an opportunity to exercise our physical bodies while increasing self-awareness in the context of community. Using choreographed movement focusing on our whole physical bodies, Melodee simultaneously pushes us mentally. No longer do Core participants work their abdominals with simple sets of

⁶⁸ Morris, April 14, 2017.

⁶⁹ Morris, February 6, 2017.

crunches. Melodee introduced new exercise sequences that we initially struggled to follow; but after the course of a few weeks, Core participants grew stronger and more capable, and our self-confidence grew at the same time.

Reflecting on those early classes of Core brings a smile to my face. We were traveling together on a journey to enhanced physical and mental well-being. In doing so, we became a community. The journey continues. It transcends anything I ever experienced previously through group fitness, lifting weights, or even cardio routines. I have become much more comfortable with my own body. I laugh at myself more easily now than I did eight years ago. As a group, we have grown through Melodee's leadership, through our own individual commitment and effort, and through the sense of community we have developed.

Simply Core has expanded significantly in eight years. Melodee now teaches more than ten classes each week. Drawing upon her professional training at the Alaska Club and through various certifications in recent years, Melodee demonstrates in each class how safety is paramount within each move and every routine (no matter if this involves working on the mat, using folding chairs, fitness balls, or floor routines). Throughout class, Melodee models the correct technique in a non-threatening way. She typically demonstrates new moves in slow motion before starting a new sequence. After class, Melodee practices with whoever needs help.

Core participants experience not only physical, but mental and social benefits through their engagement in the program. Melodee often hears from individuals about the impacts Core has on their lives. One woman recently told her after a cardio class, "I was having a bad day when I came in and (now) I feel so (much) relief."⁷⁰ Others attend class while working through

⁷⁰Morris, February 6, 2017.

personal grief. In my survey of Core participants, one person shared that Core is a place of healing for her after the loss of a family member.⁷¹

Under Melodee's leadership, a culture of encouragement, empathy and affirmation has developed within Simply Core Alaska. We interact with one another like family and community members. For example, during class, after an intense floor routine is finished, cheers of celebration bounce off the studio rafters. At the beginning of class, seasoned Core participants introduce themselves to newcomers and help them set up equipment for class. Core participants often cheer for a new instructor who initiates the modeling of a routine. Melodee greets each person, new or veteran, with the same smile and genuine words of welcome. Throughout the past eight years, I have witnessed how she encourages individuals new to Core, assuring them that they are not alone and they are doing fine. Melodee is not immune from the apprehensions, anxieties or self consciousness of new participants. I recently asked her to explain her own thought process before leading classes. She responded:

It's about facilitating. You are not performing. It's being up there (at the front of the class) for your group. Your job is to inspire people, to make them feel important, to make people feel worthy of being there, worthy. It's done through eye contact and a genuine humble heart. And I think the only way to truly connect with people and share that with people in that way is that you have to do the work (yourself).⁷²

What about the success of a class? How does Melodee determine success? Melodee believes success is what a person draws from the class. Do they feel included? Are they enjoying themselves? These are questions Melodee asks herself regarding all people who participate. "I

⁷¹ Surveys by Core participants were done between February and March 2017.

⁷² Morris, February 6, 2017.

can tell when people are frustrated. I have been in their shoes, and I think that frustration to some degree is really normal when starting any new anything. My goal every day is that people belong there.”⁷³

Melodee believes that when participants are smiling throughout class, they are enjoying themselves. For someone to smile in the middle of a four-minute arm song, or after a three-minute plank routine, speaks to the culture of the class itself. From Melodee’s perspective, she is not performing as a leader; instead, she is facilitating life change. “I want to see them relieved in some way; I want people to see them(selves) meeting their goals. This is how I determine instructor success.”⁷⁴

Author Dan Ariely, a Duke University professor wrote, “To motivate ourselves and others successfully, we need to provide a sense of connection and meaning—remembering that meaning is not always synonymous with personal happiness. Arguably, the most powerful motivator in the world is our connection to others.”⁷⁵ Melodee often shouts to the class, “why did you come here?” in the middle of a difficult abdominal set. Her question targets not only the class, but herself as well. Melodee is present and active with the class throughout the most grueling sequences. I often look at Melodee or others for motivation when my own muscles are not “happy.” While we individually push ourselves through the routine, collectively we finish the sequence together. In the following chapter I will present the survey data I obtained from Simply Core Alaska participants in February and March 2017. Their responses will shed light on participant motivations and the benefits they derive from the program.

⁷³ Morris, February 6, 2017.

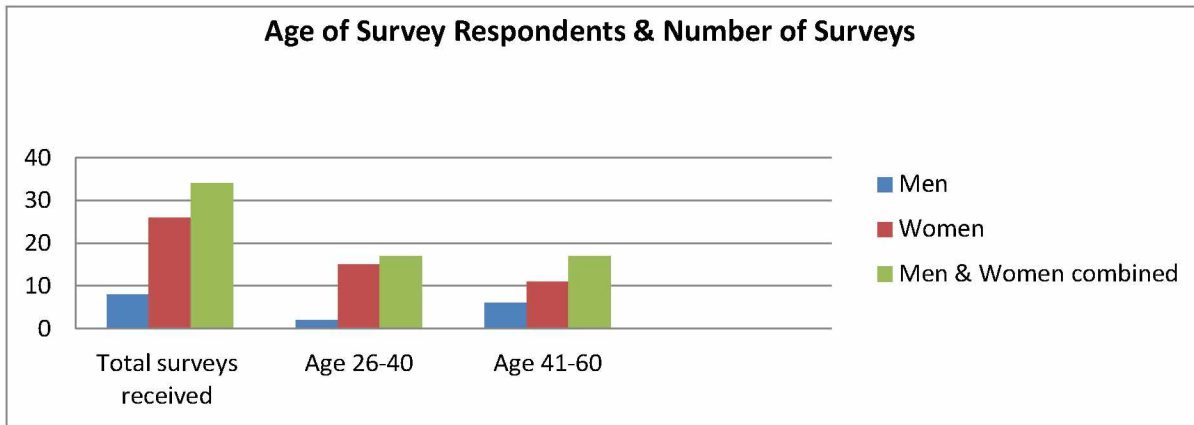
⁷⁴ Morris, February 6, 2017.

⁷⁵ Dan Ariely, *Payoff The Hidden Logic that Shapes our Motivations* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2016), 101.

Chapter 3: What the Survey Data reveals: Analyzing Simply Core Alaska from a Quantitative approach

Between January 16 and January 30, 2017, and on March 4, Simply Core participants completed surveys for this project. I designed the survey to elicit participants' motivations for participating in Simply Core. Based on my own experience, I hypothesized that responses would show that the program offered a variety of physical, mental and social benefits and that over the years, the class had become a community. This chapter presents survey results, illustrating Core participants' views of the impacts of Core on their lives.

I distributed seventy-three surveys to receptive Core participants in numerous classes during the data collection period. Thirty-four participants returned surveys, a response rate of 47 percent. Twenty-six women and eight men completed surveys. Thus, 76 percent of respondents were female and 24 percent were male. Men generally represent less than 25 percent of class participants, so the gender differential among survey participants roughly replicates the gender differential in Core classes. Men have participated in Core only in the past few years. I provided for three participant age groups -- 18-25, 26-40, and 41-60 years old for both men and women. However, no one in the youngest age group completed the survey. The total number of respondents in each of the older age categories was the same. In both age categories more women responded than men.



Understanding the value of Simply Core Alaska

The survey included nine questions related to participants' experience in Simply Core. Questions one, two and six required qualitative answers: Why did you first come to Simply Core? What did you anticipate before your first Core class? Please explain the impact Simply Core has made in your life. Questions three, four and five were multiple choice questions. For example, question 3 asked: Please indicate which of the following compel you to return to Core, and offered several options. Questions seven, eight and nine asked the following: How long have you been participating in Simply Core? On average how many classes do you participate in weekly? Which seasons do you participate in class most?

Why people attend Core classes

I wanted to learn what attracted Core participants to the program the first time, as well as what motivated them to return to the class. To Question 1: "Why did you first come to Core?" participants responded with a variety of thoughts ranging from being brought by a friend or spouse, to having heard that Core was a great class, to desiring increased physical health and

aerobic capacity. Of the eight men who returned surveys, five of them, or 67 percent were either brought by their spouses or girlfriends. Six women in the 26-40 age group came to Core for the first time either with a friend or having been encouraged by a friend. Two women in the 41-60 age group were recommended by friends to investigate Core. Of the 34 respondents, 13 individuals, or 38 percent, were influenced by someone in their immediate circles to try out Simply Core.

To learn more about participants' expectations of Simply Core, the survey asked what they anticipated before the first Core class and what their impressions of the first class were. Many were either not sure what to expect or had heard that it was a difficult class. Some questioned whether they would be able to complete the class. Others expressed their trepidations in terms of "feeling self conscious" or "being embarrassed in front of strangers." I remember having such self-doubts throughout my first year attending Core.

As for their impressions after the first class, surveys revealed that many participants not only wanted to return for another class, but "loved it." One survey participant wrote, I was "hooked (and) loved it." Several other respondents noted that the experience confirmed it was a physically hard class, but it also challenged them mentally. For example, one person wrote, "more than expected, hard to describe in respect to mental/emotional well being." People felt challenged and energized after the first class. Another participant wrote: "liked it more than I thought I would, I might make it eventually," suggesting that while she had difficulty keeping up, she saw potential for improvement. By design, Melodee choreographs each class in such a way that anyone can participate, no matter his or her fitness level.

The heart of the survey asked participants to explain why they keep returning to Core, what they derive from the classes, and what they appreciate most. The question aimed to elicit

enough information to develop an understanding of the participants' holistic experience in Simply Core Alaska. My conviction that Simply Core Alaska was much more than an exercise class generated my hypothesis that Simply Core is a community that offers some of the same support that families provide.

Knowing that other obligations and activities competed for participants' time, I asked participants in Question 3 of the survey to indicate why they returned to Core. Respondents could select from these options:

- A. The variety of music played during each choreographed song
- B. Style of leadership and instruction by Melodee Morris
- C. Environment, or the atmosphere of the class
- D. Sense of community found within class itself
- E. All of the above
- F. Others, please list:

More than any single response, participants indicated that all of the various components of the class experience -- components and characteristics that Melodee intentionally has chosen - - keep them returning to the classes. Interestingly, men age 26-40 expressed the importance of music and style at higher levels than women of the same age. The results were the same for men between 41 and 60 years old. Women tended to respond more strongly to Melodee's leadership style. But as a whole, high percentages of respondents indicated that the whole experience kept them returning.

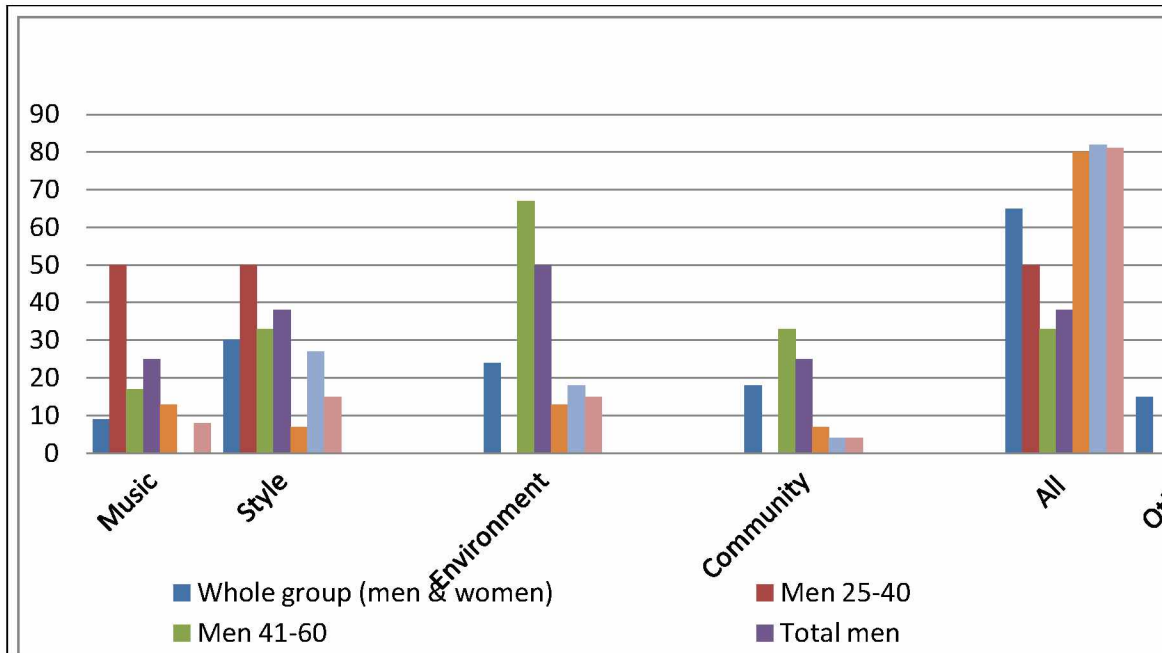


Figure 1
Question 3: Which factors compel participants to return to Core

These responses correlate well with my own observations as a participant in Simply Core classes. I find that both men and women, of all ages, equally participate and express enthusiasm throughout an hour-long or ninety-minute class. Expressing both relief and exuberance, participants typically “whoop it up” after an intense song. Melodee’s encouragement not only powers participants through difficult workouts, but inspires them to join her in cheering at the end of the routine. The environment within in the class generates enthusiasm and endurance on our part, which in turn allows us to spur one another on. This may not be in the form of words, since after a cardio or mat song, we are breathless; however it is common for individuals to smile at each other, share an equally fatigued facial expression or “high five” one another after the song. Such gestures contribute to the sense of community in the program.

Participants' Perceptions of the Benefits They Derive from Simply Core Alaska

Based on my hypothesis that Simply Core Alaska is much more than an exercise class, I sought participants' perceptions of their relationship with the program and group. I wanted to know what needs the program fills and what values it provides participants. Question 4 asked:

Which of the following best describes your relationship to Simply Core:

- A. An exercise class where I can get my physical fitness needs met
- B. Simply Core meets both my physical fitness & mental fitness needs
- C. Simply Core facilitates a sense of community, including helping to meet physical & mental fitness.

Far more respondents described their relationship with Simply Core in terms of its facilitating a sense of community, including promoting their physical and mental fitness, than those who indicated it primarily served their physical or mental fitness needs.

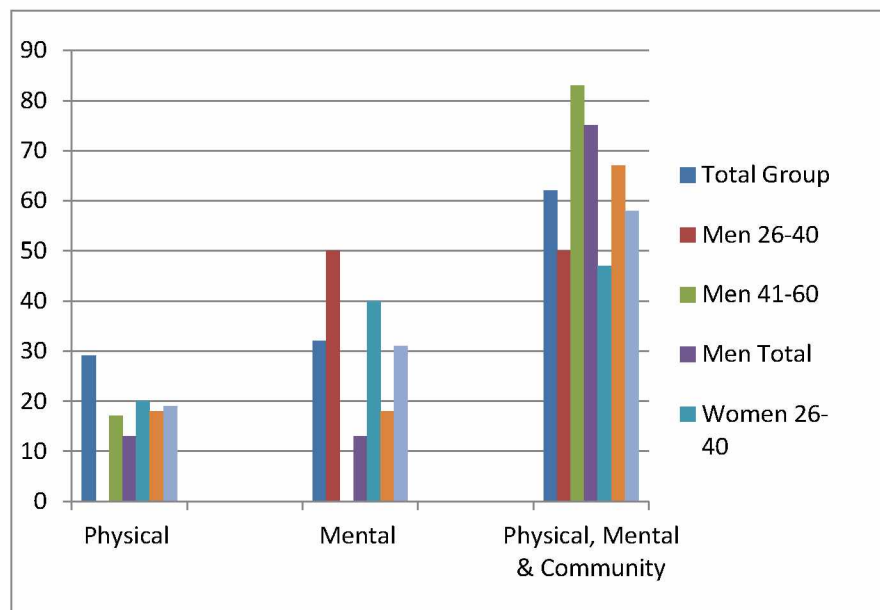


Figure 2:
Question 4: Participants' relationship to Simply Core in terms of physical and mental fitness and/or community

Participants' Sense of Community

Question 5 sought to shed light on what contextual factors influenced participants' sense of community. I wanted to explore whether and how aspects of Fairbanks' northern frontier location might lead residents to fill their need for community, and even family, through a program like Simply Core that brings people together to promote both physical and mental well-being. For instance, do Alaska's geographic conditions and living away from extended family affect Core participants' views on community?

Question 5 reads as follows: *Please indicate which of the following factors specific to Alaska affect your connection to community year round.* Options included:

- A. Geographic distance from family and friends living in the Lower 48
 - B. Periods of limited daylight during the Winter
 - C. Extreme winter temperatures
 - D. Seasonal changes in energy levels
 - E. All of the Above
- Additional factors: _____

Figure three illustrates survey participants' responses to question five. Like their responses to question 4, these answers indicate that significant percentages of participants perceive Simply Core as meeting multiple needs. Most categories of respondents indicated more agreement with *all* of the factors than with any single factor. These data demonstrate that significant percentages of respondents perceive Simply Core Alaska as providing a sense of community in ways that relate to the challenging northern setting we inhabit.

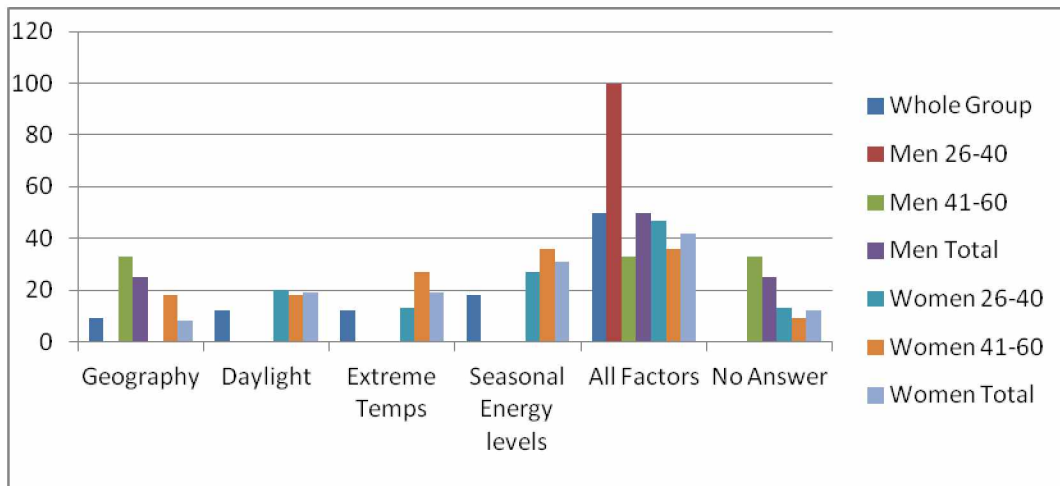


Figure 3:
Question 5: Factors specific to Alaska affecting connection to community:
 Note: For male respondents in the 26 to 40 age group, there were only two respondents

Impact of Simply Core on Participants' Lives

The previous questions led participants to respond to my perceptions of the values we derive from participating in Simply Core. I therefore felt it was important to include an open ended question in the survey that would allow participants to express their impressions, without being influenced by me. Question 6 asked respondents to: *Please explain the impact Simply Core has made in your life.*

Participants wrote that they experienced increased physical and mental fitness after participating in Core. One person wrote, “Physically, my body is in the best shape ever-Simply Core is now my life. I am mentally balanced and strong.” Another wrote that Core started as a work out, then became “so much more.” This person also shared that Core not only facilitates stress management in his life, but Core has become part of his family unit.

One hundred percent of the participants shared the impact of Core on their lives. While comments varied, they each illustrated one or more types of healthy change in their lives. The

candor and depth of answers to question six, illustrated that the impact of Core on people's lives extended beyond physical fitness. For example, one of the male participants noted that as his social circle shrunk, Core remained a place where he could "talk to anyone and have something in common." Another male addressed the challenge to be active in Alaska's long winters with these words, "it's great to work out to fast paced music when it is cold outside." Two women shared that Core allowed them to heal following loss. Another said that she works out more in the winter because of Core. One woman wrote: "I wanted to leave Fairbanks before I found Simply Core." Another wrote in a similar vein: "It's a significant part of wanting to remain here (in Alaska)."

Participants' responses also included candid reflections such as: "Gratitude for what I have in my life, and what I am capable of when I set goals." Another wrote: "Complete change, weight loss, more energy, completely transformed, less back pain, overcoming injury." One response that all Core participants know intimately is Core "helps me get my sweat on." These responses suggest the class has had truly transformative effects on many participants.

Respondents' Length of Participation in Simply Core

I asked participants how long they had participated in the program to understand the seriousness of their commitment to Core. Interestingly, male survey participants were some of the longer term Core participants, even though men have only been participating for a few years now. Of all survey participants, 41 percent have been part of the Core experience between one and two years. As a whole, respondents' length of participation represents a significant commitment to Simply Core Alaska and lends weight to the responses indicating the value that Core has added to participants' lives.

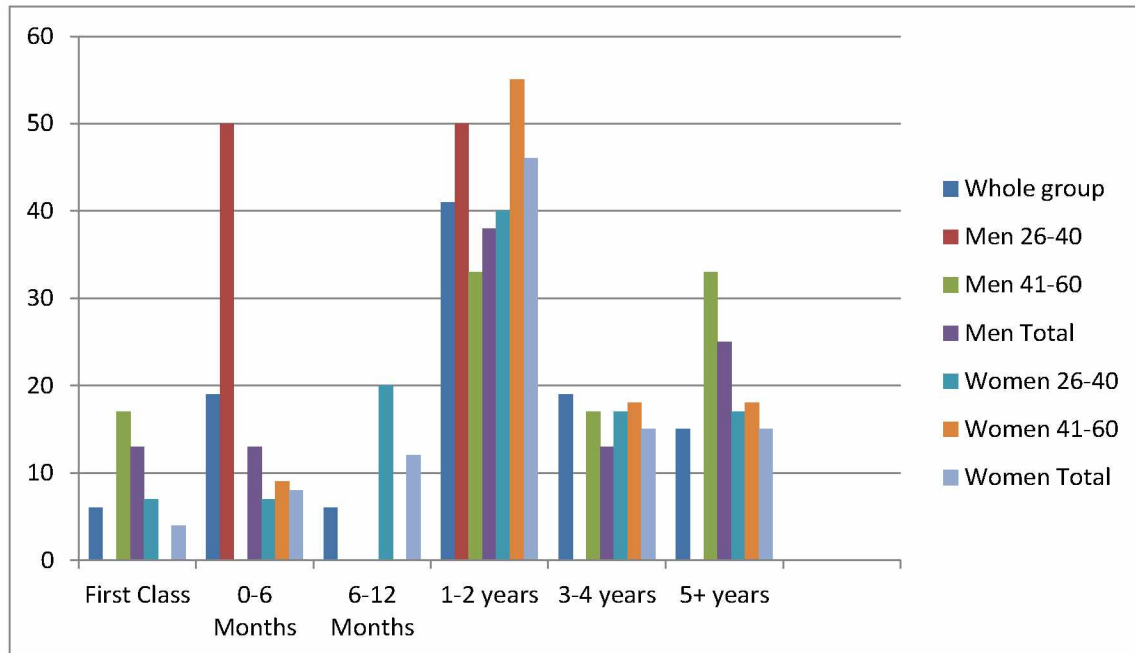


Figure 4:
Question 7: Length of participation in Simply Core Alaska

Number of Times per Week Respondents Attend Classes

I also asked Core participants how often they attend classes throughout the week to learn how significant a weekly commitment they were making to Core. As Figure 5 shows, survey respondents tend to attend classes two to three times per week. Older female respondents attend classes somewhat more frequently perhaps owing to having more uncommitted time during the week. Among survey respondents, men's attendance rates are similar to women's.

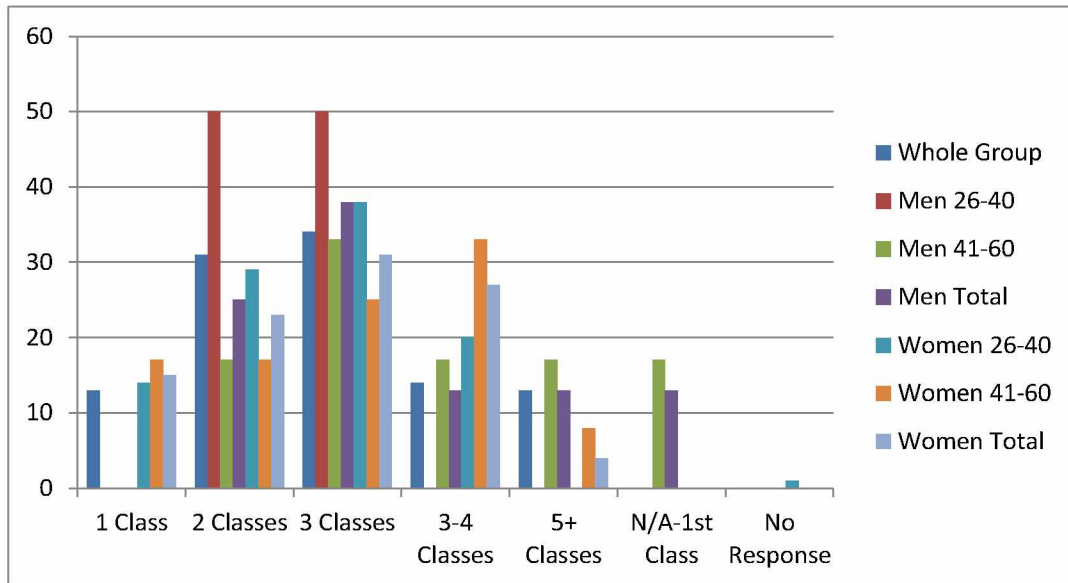


Figure 5:

Question 8: Average amount of classes attended each week

Seasonality of Participation

Given Alaska's extreme weather and the seasonal nature of certain activities, I also was interested in learning about the seasonal variability of attendance in Simply Core classes. Figure 6 below represents survey respondents' class attendance by season. The young men and women responded that they participate more frequently during the winter. This is not surprising, given that fewer other activities tend to compete for Fairbanksans' time during the winter. Also, winter is often a challenging season for Alaskans. Cold temperatures, limited day light and other Arctic factors keep people inside and less engaged in outdoor physical activities. Yet, responses indicate that nearly half of survey participants attend classes at similar rates year round. Class attendance does ebb and flow throughout the seasons; however, I have continually observed that our community maintains its nexus year round.

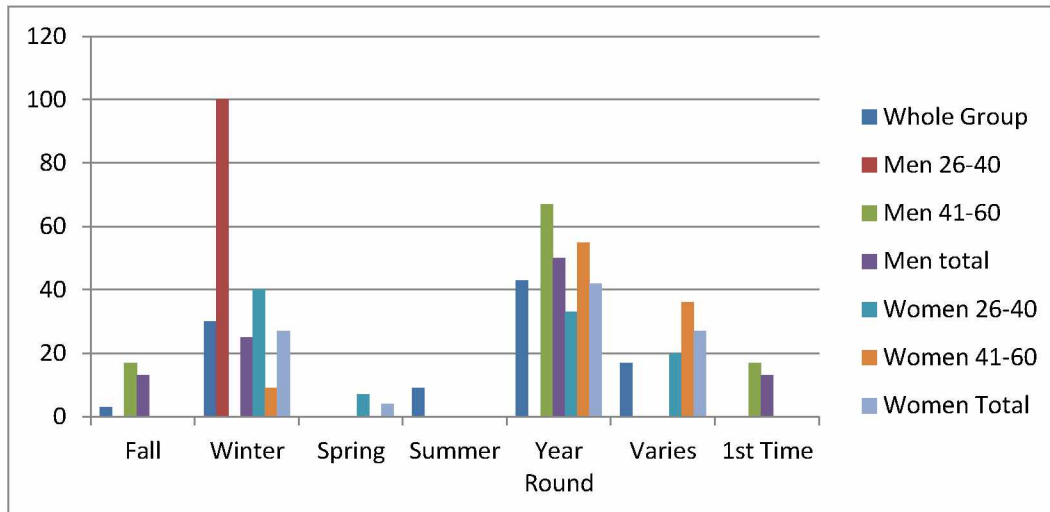


Figure 6:

Question 9: Seasons of the year in which individuals participate the most

These data as a whole indicate that men and women in each age group participate in Simply Core year round. All age groups and genders participate in Core throughout Alaska's long winters as a means of physical fitness, mental health and social connection. Over a third of participants were initially introduced to, or brought to class by a friend/spouse. Individuals return to Core on average of three times a week for several reasons, including music selection, style of leadership, the class environment, and the spirit of community. Participants have been part of Core for an average of one to two years. However, involvement among men and women also stretches well beyond three years.

Chapter four will analyze Simply Core Alaska's meaning to participants, drawing further upon the survey data, impromptu conversations with individuals, along with interviews conducted with Melodee Morris, as well as one male and two female long-term participants. My own observations of the class also will inform the discussion of Simple Core Alaska as a community.

Chapter 4: Discuss: Core's Relevance to Participants

Why would anyone return to Simply Core, three or more times a week, for years on end? And why would men participate in a class that is overwhelmingly female? No, Core is not a place for “hook ups;” there is no time between sets for flirtation, as we are dripping sweat. Not exactly the most attractive scene, or is it?

From time to time visitors to the Artisan's Courtyard stop and watch our class through the window next to the studio door. Depending of the class's intensity, participants may push through the studio doors between sets, breathing heavily, gulping water, or toweling themselves off. A patron at Artisan's may hear the beat of the music, or shouts emanating from within the studio, and may stop to watch the class. I have not seen revulsion in their eyes, but rather awe and interest. Recently, between cardio songs, I invited a middle-aged woman to join us. She stood next to the studio, nodded at me and continued watching. Will she join our Core madness sooner than later? I hope so.

In her recently published book, *Emotional Agility*, Harvard Medical School psychologist Susan David wrote, “Emotional agility is the absence of pretense and performance, which gives your actions greater power because they emanate from your core values and core strength, something solid and genuine and real.”⁷⁶ In my February interview with Melodee, she noted her narrowed daily goal for Core includes people feeling they belong (and are included) in class.⁷⁷ Recently, I followed up with Melodee, specifically to clarify her broader goals for Simply Core as a fitness class and community. Melodee wants each participant to “know their own core

⁷⁶ Susan Davis, *Emotional Agility: Get Unstuck, Embrace Change and Thrive in Work and Life* (New York: Avery, 2016), 241, (italics added).

⁷⁷ Melodee Morris, interview by author, Fairbanks, Alaska, February 6, 2017.

strength physically and mentally.”⁷⁸ In the traditional fitness sense, *core* fitness means a person attends class to push their body physically, with their abdominals, back, and pelvic muscles engaged. *Core* fitness also includes increased physical strength and stability. Delving deeper, into the crux of Core, as she applies the principles, Melodee clarifies that she wants participants to increase their self-awareness and connection to our inner selves. For, “it is then we can truly connect with others...(when we) remain humble, authentic and living with purpose on purpose.”⁷⁹

Original research in this project (in addition to collecting surveys) includes interviews and impromptu conversations with Simply Core Alaska participants. I interviewed two female and one male Core participant in February and March 2017. Additionally, between January and March 2017, spontaneous conversations with Core participants took place, in passing between classes, as they inquired about my progress on this project or simply shared their personal experiences in Core. I believe each person referenced in this chapter embodies Susan David’s message and Melodee’s own goals for each one of us. Emotional agility requires living boldly as oneself, unafraid to push oneself beyond physical, mental and emotional barriers. In a sense, David’s message mirrors the acronym of CORE: *Center of Raw Energy*.

Mike, one of the first men to join Simply Core, speaks candidly about how Core initially became a catalyst for change in his life. He now considers this group part his own family. Catharine, who wanted to leave Fairbanks before finding Simply Core, attributes staying in Fairbanks to the impact Core has made in her life. Pep, who found Simply Core amidst a healing season of her own, sometimes sheds tears during class, a natural part of the healing process. The

⁷⁸ Morris, text message to author, April 4, 2017.

⁷⁹ Morris, April 4, 2017. Note: I added the words (where we). I believe this fits the author’s intent.

following paragraphs present and interpret responses these three participants provided during interviews about their experiences in Simply Core Alaska. I have also integrated pertinent comments of other Core participants.

During the interviews I asked respondents similar questions to those on the survey, including how interviewees initially found Core, why they returned after their first class, how Core has impacted their lives; and their thoughts on what Core represents beyond a class – whether they sense that it represents community and family linked together. I wanted to delve deeper into the survey questions.

How did you first hear about Core, what brought you to Core?

The band Fire Flight recorded a song titled, *For those Who Wait*, whose lyrics cry out, *the struggle makes us stronger, the struggle makes us hunger*.⁸⁰ Mike Everett is not a newcomer to personal struggle. In fact he lived through it a few years ago. Having recently lost one parent, receiving a dementia diagnosis for the other, and carrying too much body weight, Mike knew he needed a change. Five years ago, his friend, Sheryl introduced him to Melodee. Before Mike crossed the studio threshold, he spoke with Melodee regarding his physical limitations. In our recent interview, he recalled his first conversation with Melodee: “Before I did this (Core) for the very first time, I called Melodee and gave her my medical history, partially, as I had a rotator cuff surgery two or three months prior, and Mel was great. She basically tells us, like she tells all of us, ‘pay attention to your body, if it hurts, don’t do it.’ (It’s) pretty simple, but it’s exactly what we need to hear.”⁸¹ Mike elaborated that it took a lot of encouragement from his friend

⁸⁰“For those Who Wait,” Fire Flight, Pandora Internet Radio, accessed March 29, 2017, <https://www.pandora.com/station/play/315627684891717931>.

⁸¹ Mike Everett interview by author, Fairbanks, Alaska, February 9, 2017.

Sheryl (also a Core participant) to try Core initially. However, once he discovered Core, it was a “no brainer, you stay put.”⁸² To this day, Mike remains a solid figure in our Core community. He greets people at each class with a smile, while assisting Melodee with class set up.

Pep’s introduction to Core followed participation in another physical fitness class known as *Zumba*. In 2015, Zumba classes at Artisan’s Courtyard ended. While Pep knew of Core, she felt intimidated by the class. She recounted in her interview, “I was intimidated by it because it seemed very hard core..... I needed to find an alternative exercise class so I took the plunge and tried Core.”⁸³ Attending any new exercise class often fills participants with anxiety. Pep acknowledged she may not have been quite ready, and class was challenging, but “Everyone was encouraging. It didn't feel competitive or ‘clique-y.’”⁸⁴

Pep is not alone; several participants (both men and women) felt anxiety prior to their first classes. However, their initial concerns soon were outweighed by their desire to return. Leslie, a Core friend I often see on Saturdays, remarked after our February 18, 2017 class, “This Core class is the best thing I have ever done.”⁸⁵ Typically, I work out next to her on Saturdays, and we share smiles between sets and similar facial expressions of ‘ugh’ after the long, intense upper body routine.

Catharine learned of Core from her friend Ann Marie during a pivotal season in her own life. Seasonal depression from limited sun light and Alaska’s long Arctic winters started wearing on Catharine. A long time Fairbankskan, she was on the verge of leaving Fairbanks until

⁸²Everett, February 9, 2017.

⁸³ Pep Manalang, email message, March 27, 2017. Pep was out of town when I was conducting interviews in person.

⁸⁴Manalang, March 27, 2017.

⁸⁵Leslie, conversation with author, February 18, 2017.

discovering Core as an outlet for both her physical and mental health needs. Catharine and I sat down recently, and she explained, “I kind of was getting really depressed, because the weather here in the winter is so atrocious that you can’t always get outside. It’s so dark you can’t always get outside to exercise. I can’t live here if I can’t exercise. So, my friend Ann Marie said ‘you should start coming to Core with me.’ She had found Core somehow. And I did. I remember the first class I came to, I was hooked!”⁸⁶

Question: After the first class, why did you return?

Catharine, from the beginning, loved the energy and spirit of Core. Years after her first class, Catharine still remembers Melodee being “so sweet and so positive. I did not feel intimidated whatsoever.”⁸⁷ Mike recalled feeling awkward and inept during his first Core session, but the energy and the group spirit felt inclusive. It did not matter that he knew few of the moves, nor did it matter that he was out of step and held anxieties of his own. By simply participating, Mike met Melodee’s goal for each class: Mike felt included and participated at his comfort level. Melodee’s encouragement after the class was the clincher. She called him to ask how he felt and to encourage him to return. Mike captured his thoughts from the original class in these words:

Well, I think there were a lot of things that happened that first class. I think the first thing (is), you see the energy. Even though, you know, I felt like a total ditz, they (the class) were already going to the left, and I was still going to the right. I was trying not to hurt anyone. I didn’t crash into anybody. Um, but it was the

⁸⁶Catharine Livingston interview by author, February 11, 2017.

⁸⁷Livingston, February 11, 2017.

incredible energy in the room, people having fun, you look into the mirror, people smiling and having a great time. It was frustrating not knowing the moves and the choreography. But what really, really set it in (was) when Melodee called me afterwards.....Her personality was such a big key part of it, making you feel right at home.⁸⁸

Data from survey question three match Catharine's, Mike's and Pep's reasons for revisiting Core. Pep returned after her first class for several reasons, including Melodee's ability not only to challenge her physically, but to extend a "healing vibe." She was in the midst of deep healing from the passing of two siblings, the betrayal of a friend, ankle surgery, and another friend's moving from Fairbanks.⁸⁹ Throughout the years, I have witnessed Melodee display her humanity in class. She recently remarked, "I am sharing from my soul and my heart, and I think people feel it."⁹⁰ I firmly believe the shouts, and exuberant words of encouragement emanating from Melodee reflect one of her personal goals for each class: to applaud and engage each individual at their own level of fitness.

Pep commented on the community quality of Core, saying, "I also felt that the people were more of a community rather than just strangers looking out for themselves. I really like(d) the atmosphere in class."⁹¹ Sixty-five percent of surveys noted in question three that all of these factors (music, style, environment and community) influenced respondents' choice of further

⁸⁸Everett, February 9, 2017. Note: Melodee and Mike reviewed his first class via phone conversation.

⁸⁹Manalang, March 27, 2017.

⁹⁰Morris, February 6, 2017.

⁹¹Manalang, March 27, 2017.

Core participation. Gitte, whom I also routinely work out next to on Saturdays noted recently, “Melodee makes it fun.”⁹² Gitte and Leslie are also friends outside of class, and often partake in a light meal at the café in Artisan’s Courtyard, after Saturday class.

Gitte vocalizes Melodee’s goal that people not only participate in a class that is physically and mentally beneficial, but “fun” as well. Gitte finished half a Saturday class last month when she had a cold. She is not the only one who attends Core when under the weather. I have also worked through classes while trying to keep a cold at bay. This commitment to *regular* participation testifies to Core’s influence on mental health, in addition to physical fitness.

Pep’s husband, Tim, in an impromptu conversation after a Saturday class, shared how Core became increasingly important to him because of the mental and emotional benefits he found in our class.⁹³ He explained, “Core teaches us to rethink our limits and realize that we can also accomplish more than we realized in the past.” Tim’s comment captures the mental fitness objectives of the Core program.

Three weeks after Tim shared his thoughts, he led a cardio dance for the first time. Melodee motioned for Tim to join her in leading a song with 1970s dance moves. Tim demonstrated in action the words he spoke only a few weeks before. Cheers filled the studio throughout the song. In the midst of following Tim’s choreography, I smiled and mentally noted, not only were we witnessing a leader emerge, but also evidence of why people return to class. Melodee’s goals for Core are realized as individuals develop a deeper sense of belonging while expanding their own participation levels.⁹⁴

⁹²Gitte, conversation with author, Fairbanks, Alaska, February 18, 2017.

⁹³ Mike Dennis, conversation with author, Fairbanks, Alaska, March 4, 2017.

⁹⁴ Author observation, April 1, 2017.

Question: What impact has Core had in your life: physical, mental, emotional?

By a two to one margin, survey respondents said in response to question four that Core is a place where their physical, mental and community needs are met. In their interviews Mike, Pep and Catharine identified a remarkable spectrum of mental and physical benefits they gained from Core – with mental health benefits ranging from encouragement to catharsis. Mike related, “I tease people that this is my heroine. It’s what I need. This is my fix. This is what I need to keep the day going. I need it for stress relief, to keep (my) body (functioning) correctly.”⁹⁵

Pep explained that Core helped her process her pent-up emotions, allowing her to move on. “Core provided me relief from my emotional turmoil. Physical exertion took my mind off my sadness, but also helped release the tears I was holding in.... Core encouraged me to accept my feelings and process my grief.”⁹⁶ For Catharine, Core has become a community. As it always has for Melodee, dancing holds a special place in Catharine’s life. Dancing with others represents a spiritual gathering for her, where the group melds together for one purpose. Prior to discovering Core, Catharine struggled to locate local dancing venues that abstained from smoking. She explained, “We’re there to work out and challenge ourselves and get kind of that endorphin rush. And so sharing in that community is sort of spiritual for me. And I can seriously feel the energetic vibe in there and it’s addictive.”⁹⁷

⁹⁵Everett, February 9, 2017.

⁹⁶Manalang, March 27, 2017.

⁹⁷Livingston, February 11, 2017.

Susan David summarizes Pep's season of healing and Catharine's sense of spirituality in Core, in her description of *emotional agility*. David explains, "Emotional agility is a process that allows you to be in the moment, changing or maintaining your behaviors to live in ways that align with your intention and values. The process isn't about ignoring difficult emotions and thoughts. It's about holding those emotions and thoughts loosely, facing them courageously and compassionately; and then moving past them to make big things happen in your life."⁹⁸ The organic quality of the Core experience allows it to meet the spectrum of participants' physical, mental and emotional health needs. Because Melodee and other participants welcome everyone equally, they can "get their fixes," work out their physical or mental stress, or release their tears, as needed, on any given day.

This class environment of acceptance and encouragement, no matter what participants' skill levels or the specific "cure" needed that day, fosters the sense of family and community that Core participants acknowledged in surveys and interviews. Mike, Pep, Catharine and others freely express themselves in class because there is no judgment, only respect for one another. Lizette, a Core participant who returned after ten days of absence from class, remarked after our January 16, 2017 class, "She's killing me." I smiled at her comment, because I also know what ten days absence of Core does to the body."⁹⁹ Yet, I understand Mike's reference to Core as his "fix," for I go into "withdrawals" when I am traveling Outside. Returning to class the first time after being away is truly coming home. We often welcome each other back with smiles or hugs before the class begins.

⁹⁸Davis, *Emotional Agility*, 11.

⁹⁹ Lizette, conversation with author, Fairbanks, Alaska, January 16, 2017.

Question: How would you describe Core in terms of community?

Simply Core not only facilitates release of endorphins, but meets deeper needs related to our nature as social beings – our desire to belong. When I asked Mike for his thoughts on community, he smiled, paused and responded, “Everyone is happy to be there. It’s not just the workout, it’s the community, it’s family, this is our Core family.....To me, you develop relationships you care about, they are just good people.”

Catharine’s comments support Mike’s thoughts:

Being with a group of people who have the same common goal -- I can be having the worst day, or be really upset or stressed out, or whatever, and then come to Core and it totally changes my whole day. It changes everything about my being right there. It puts my whole body on a different vibe. So, to me, the community is ... being together, having common purpose. I have made friends.¹⁰⁰

Catharine and Pep, interviewed at separate times (one in person, one via email) mirrored one another’s thoughts without knowing it. Pep affirmed Catharine’s reflection of Core’s community in this manner:

People who come to Core on a regular basis form a convivial community. We greet each other, we notice when people are missing, we care about each other's welfare, perhaps not on a close personal level, but on a human level, like we are all in this together. It has a global outlook that goes beyond artificial boundaries. I think core provided me with a community that met my need for social interaction. At the same time, it's not a

¹⁰⁰Livingston, February 11, 2017.

demanding community. You can be as involved or as uninvolved as you feel comfortable being.”¹⁰¹

Towards the end of my interview with Melodee in February, I asked her how she has seen community develop since the inception of Core nearly ten years ago. Melodee initially said, “Oh my goodness, it’s like a big family in a lot of ways.” She paused, took a moment to collect her thoughts and continued, echoing ideas expressed by participants:

.....When I am there, I feel amongst people who have been there for years, days, months, or 20 minutes, I feel (a) sense of genuine compassion, and there’s not judgment, there’s an excitement, everything in that hour, it is so positive, it just feels like home for that hour. And I know that some people come for physical fitness, some people come for mental health reasons, some come for both. But it’s a safe place and, and I think that when you have a strong sense of community, it is a safe place, a safe place to share..... And to me, any tightly knit community has a certain level (of flexibility), open minded(ness) and there is no judgment, there is just love.¹⁰²

A few weeks ago, at the end of our March 20, 2017 Monday night mat class, I found myself musing over this reality: what we have is truly special, so unique that we call it *Simply Core Alaska*. At the finish line of this Master’s program, I remain confident in my original hypothesis: participants in Core experience the same community I have known since my first Core class nearly ten years ago.

¹⁰¹Manalang, March 27, 2017.

¹⁰²Morris, February 6, 2017.

Conclusion

Traditionally, Sundays are days of rest, spent with family and friends. This extends to our community of Core as well. We rest our bodies and minds, in preparation for the following week's return to body/mind endurance. As I delved into this Project, it was my intention to use the words of Core participants to capture the music of Core in the silence of Sundays. Today is Sunday, and I am reflecting on my public defense of this project two days ago. That day Natalie, a relative newcomer to Core, told me about what Core means to her.

Natalie discovered Core recently through a friend she met after moving to the Fairbanks area last fall from Austin. Like transplants before her, Natalie ventured to Alaska in support of her fiancé, a professional dog musher. She arrived here knowing only her fiancé and her children. Natalie had no community, besides her family, prior to trying out Core recently. Her eyes brimmed with tears as she told Melodee and me: "Inside these walls (it's) different. I can't wait for the next class, everyone smiles and people smile back."¹⁰³

The afternoon I met Natalie, April 14, she had just attended her second Core class. Her voice trembled as she shared the impact Core had in her life already, after participating only twice. She told Melodee and me that she smiled for the first time since moving to Alaska a week prior, during her first Core experience. She said she found a place where "It all goes away." That is, the stress she had been feeling since leaving Austin for a remote location outside of Fairbanks

¹⁰³ Natalie, conversation with author, Fairbanks, Alaska, April 14, 2017. Natalie told Melodee and me that people at the gym in Austin ignored her when she said hello. She said that people appeared to be focused solely on themselves at the gym. Her brief observations within two Core classes contrasted with previous fitness experiences.

had lifted when she came to her first Core class.¹⁰⁴ She added, “I just love this class, I just want to come back.”

Alaska is a vast and starkly diverse land. One could argue that communities throughout the state share as many differences as similarities. Yet, each reflects humans’ need for social interaction and our reliance on one another for physical, mental and emotional well-being. As I began this project I hypothesized that here in the far north, family and community are particularly important to mental and emotional well-being. Historically, such social support was utterly essential to survival. In a region where winters are long, cold and dark, and where individuals, especially non-Native Alaskans, often live far from their birth families and communities, we tend to form virtual families or communities to fulfill our need for close-knit social units. I hypothesized that Simply Core Alaska served as a family-community-like unit for participants. My hypothesis grew from my belief that Simply Core is more than an exercise class. Core, over the last several years, acted as a conduit to improve my own fitness goals; and simultaneously, I gained a community of support. I believed that I was not alone in this experience, and my findings support this hypothesis.

A theme that arose in the surveys, during interviews, and in participants’ spontaneous comments – one that deeply resonated with me – was the non-judgementalism and non-competitiveness within Core classes and among participants. I have often sensed this welcoming attitude and non-judgmentalism in Alaska. People tend to focus less on appearance here. People tend to be more relaxed – we come in all shapes and sizes, our yards tend to collect large amounts of clutter (including junk cars or airplanes), and our cars tend to be dirty and hold

¹⁰⁴ Natalie, April 14, 2017.

collections of survival gear, snack remnants and other miscellaneous items. We tend to accept people based on their personal qualities, rather than outward appearances. My research revealed that such non-judgmentalism is a key characteristic of the Core experience. Over the last nine years, numerous Core participants have moved away from Fairbanks for various reasons. Several, upon returning to Fairbanks for visits, have returned to Core. I believe these individuals return to the studio to join us once, twice or more during their visits, because returning to Core is like coming home and visiting old family and friends. The bonds that some participants maintain with Core, even after leaving Fairbanks, reflect Core's culture of non-judgementalism and non-competitiveness.

Pep's email interview comments support this conclusion. She said that her initial observations of Core were of a community that did not judge one another. In her words, Core was "non-cliquey." One survey respondent summarized Core's lack of judgment towards one another after their first class, in these words, "I couldn't do it, but it was okay, I don't feel judged." I have noticed newer participants, like Natalie or seasoned ones, such as Gitte and Leslie, who find a place at the back of the studio, where they can follow without drawing attention to themselves. Melodee's welcoming eyes and spirit reach all the way to the back of the studio to include the whole class. As she told me, her primary goal is to have participants feel they *belong* in the class.

After Mike's first Core experience, he chose to return, because he felt welcomed by others, even though he was out of shape. Recalling his first Core class, Mike related: "It was the incredible energy in the room, people having fun, you look into the mirror, people smiling and

having a great time.”¹⁰⁵ At my project defense, Melodee spoke to the inclusiveness and non-competitiveness in Core. She noted that she had participated in exercise classes Outside, where people were “showing off for each other.” Simply Core Alaska’s culture makes no room for such competitiveness, but rather, provides an atmosphere that welcomes all. “Our strength is in our diversity. This is part of our community,” Melodee added.¹⁰⁶

Someone at my defense asked whether Simply Core Alaska could be replicated in the Lower 48. Initially, I responded that yes, with a strong leader, and based on the principles of the relationship between physical and mental health, Core could be replicated, or transferred to another location. However, as I reflected on the survey data and interviews of Core participants, I returned to my place-based hypothesis. Of course excellent exercise classes exist Outside, with expert leaders, and where the class atmosphere is enjoyable. But I am certain that Simply Core Alaska has become such a well-integrated and close-knit family *partly because of its location*. This conclusion rests on my own experience in Core, on the research I did among participants, on the literature that grounds this project, and on my own understanding of the frontier culture in Alaska. In the far north, people tend to seek out close friends and family-like relationships because we are often far away from nuclear family, and the winter conditions are so challenging. Simply Core Alaska reflects a frontier community culture wherein members warm up to one another quickly, accept one another whatever our fitness levels, and support one another through personal struggles. These qualities make Simply Core Alaska quite like a family, affirming my hypothesis that Simply Core Alaska is more than an exercise class.

¹⁰⁵ Mike Everett, interview with author, Fairbanks, Alaska, February 9, 2017.

¹⁰⁶ Morris, conversation with author, Fairbanks, Alaska, April 14, 2017.

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Appendix

Survey

Dear Core Participant: By filling out this Survey, you affirm that you are at least 18 years of age and give your consent to use your comments to the following questions. The answers provided will be incorporated in my Arctic & Northern Studies Project at UAF. Your comments will be held in the utmost confidence, as original data in documenting Simply Core Alaska within the context of community in Alaska's Arctic.

Thank you,
Emily Main

Gender: _____ **Female** _____ **Male**
Age Group: _____ **18-25** _____ **26-40** _____ **41-60** _____ **60+**

Arctic & Northern Studies Project Survey: Simply Core Alaska in the Context of Community

- 1) Why did you first come to Simply Core? Please explain. _____
- 2) What did you anticipate before your first Core class? _____
What were your thoughts & feelings after the class? _____
Were there specific observations you made of the class that created a desire to return to another class? If so, please elaborate. _____
- 3) Please indicate which of the following compel you to return to Core?
 - A. The variety of music played during each choreographed song
 - B. Style of leadership and instruction by Melodee Morris
 - C. Environment, or the atmosphere of the class
 - D. Sense of community found within class itself
 - E. All of the above
 - F. Others, please list: _____
- 4) Which of the following best describes your relationship to Simply Core:
 - A. An exercise class where I can get my physical fitness needs met
 - B. Simply Core meets both my physical fitness & mental fitness needs
 - C. Simply Core facilitates a sense of community, including helping to meet physical & mental fitness.

5) Please indicate which of the following factors specific to Alaska affect your connection to community year round:

- A. Geographic distance from family and friends living in the Lower 48
- B. Periods of limited daylight during the Winter
- C. Extreme winter temperatures
- D. Seasonal changes in energy levels
- E. All of the above

Additional
factors: _____

6) Please explain the impact Simply Core has made in your life. _____

7) How long have you been participating in Simply Core? _____

8) On average, how many classes do you participate in weekly? _____

9) Which seasons do you participate in class most? _____